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BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

BUSINESS METHODS
IN
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
OF ART

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE AMERICAN
ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS IN
BOSTON, MAY 23, 1911

UNDER the Constitution of the Museum of which I shall speak, like other museums of its kind, no doubt, the action upon the bequest, gift, or purchase of objects of art is taken by the Trustees sitting in committees and approved by the entire Board. This necessitates a system of business in the executive offices which, with as little loss of time and energy as possible, shall be thorough and all-informing, if I may use this expression to mean the notification of a given action to all concerned—donor, vendor, curator, treasurer, registrar, photographer, sales department, and daily press. At just what point legitimate business methods become red tape has never been clearly defined, but doubtless a business house would place it where system ceases to show a profit. Surely neither such red tape nor slipshod, unbusinesslike methods of administration should be tolerated in a museum any more than in a factory, although this is a point which does not seem to have been considered worthy of much attention heretofore, if we judge by the literature on the subject.

By some, a system which in the telling may seem complicated, may be deemed unnecessary, but when it is remembered that in a large museum many different persons are affected by a single transaction, that the physical safety of the object is an important consideration in a building of long distances where many employees and visitors are coming and going, that thousands of objects are added in a year, and that hundreds of thousands of dollars are involved in these transactions, it will be seen that a careful and unvarying system must take the place of haphazard communications.

In the following statement I shall endeavor to explain a system which has been found to be necessary to meet the needs

both of the executive offices and of those persons whose work is governed by the action of the Trustees.

Gifts and bequests are usually offered by letter. This, when acknowledged by the Secretary, is copied and sent to the Chairman of the Committee of the Trustees concerned, with the statement that the objects offered will be examined by the Director and the Curator in whose department they would be included if accepted, and that a report of their recommendations will be sent to him later. The donor or representative of an estate is informed that the gift or bequest will be acted upon by the Trustees at their next meeting. Copies of the original letter are furnished to the Director and the Curator, who, after the object has been sent to the Museum, draw up their reports upon blank forms furnished by the Secretary, which with other similar forms are sent to the Chairman before the meeting of his committee.

If the object is accepted by the Trustees upon the committee's recommendation, a suitable acknowledgment is sent to the donor. Notification of this action is sent by the Secretary to the Curator and to the Registrar, who will already have received the object, giving a temporary receipt for it. At the time of the receipt of the object, the Registrar sends to the Secretary a card called from its color "the blue card," upon which he notes as much information concerning the thing itself as has come under his observation. The return of this card filled in with additional data furnished by the Curator serves as his notification of the Trustees' action. The Registrar then accessions the object in a volume which follows in its general arrangement the Accession Book perfected by libraries. The use of this kind of record, by the way, is rapidly being discontinued by the libraries that first adopted it and it is questionable whether the time spent upon it in museums is not unnecessary. The Registrar numbers the accession, his numbers running consecutively under the numeral indicating the year, and sends it to the photographer along with the blue card, keeping a copy for himself. Thus the blue card becomes what express companies call a "tracer."

The object is photographed in as many sizes as the importance of the subject, the needs of the sales department, and the demands of registration and cataloguing may require. When the photographs are made, the negative is registered by the photographer, the number of it being added to the blue card along with a print 4 x 5 in. which is pasted on the back, and both object and card are then returned to the Registrar. The card is then filed in the order of the Accession Book entry, the record being now completed by the photograph, and the object itself is delivered to the Curator, who, receipting for it, thenceforth becomes responsible for its safe-keeping and its display.

The system connected with purchases is somewhat more complicated since objects of this sort are of two kinds: those which are offered unsolicited and those which are brought to the attention of the Trustees by the Curators who desire their purchase. All objects offered for purchase are passed upon by the Curator and the Director, each of whom gives his recommendation on a blank form prepared in the Secretary's office from information supplied from the vendor's letter or by the Registrar, if the object is sent to the Museum on approval. Few of these unsolicited objects, however, are brought to the attention of the Committee on Purchases, because they are usually undesirable. In the course of a month fifty such letters, on the average, are acted upon without recourse to the committee. The objects recommended for purchase by the Curators and the Director are brought to the committee by the Secretary, who after the meeting indicates to Curator, Registrar, and Treasurer what action has been taken. The system of notification for the first two officers is the same as for gifts. To the last officer a card is sent giving facts

connected with the purchase, such as the price to be paid, and the fund out of which it is to be paid. This card with others of its kind arranged by classes serves as the Treasurer's voucher and aids him in making the correct entry in his books. The card remains in his office as an index to his ledgers.

While the blue card of accepted objects is still in the Secretary's office, its information is rearranged on a white card—so much of it, at least, as is needed—and this is submitted to the Curator for his emendations and corrections, when it becomes a catalogue entry for the new accession. Classed according to a system of classification, and with a photograph of the object pasted upon its verso, it is filed in a general catalogue. Copies of this card are given to the Curator of the department to which the object belongs, who in this way secures a catalogue of his own collections.

The usefulness of the blue card is not confined to the service which has been described. Unlike the proverbial rolling stone which gathered nothing in its career, the blue card accumulates data as it travels from department to department. Besides what has been enumerated, it furnishes information to the photographer for his records and to the sales department for its catalogues and labels. It gives to the BULLETIN its lists of monthly accessions and to the Annual Report its long list of the year's acquisitions.

An account of this system is given here not because it is considered a perfect one, but in the hope that it may be suggestive to other museums and, also, in order that it may provoke such criticism as may be helpful in its perfection. It is written down in order that it may serve as a record for any new museum about to grapple with the problems of organization.

